

Introduction

FOREWORD

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The distinctive role played by Hungarian artists and intellectuals in the drama of modern art and aesthetics is today relatively unknown and undervalued. Moreover, the signal accomplishments and manifold achievements of these Hungarian figures have been largely unheralded in contemporary Western scholarship. This prevailing circumstance was certainly not the case three-quarters of a century ago when Hungarian painters, poets, designers, and scholars were creatively shaping the character, defining the meanings, and determining the implications of modern artistic expression and progressive culture. Indeed, advanced journals of the 1910s and 1920s from America to Russia were filled with articles by and about these Hungarian pioneers of modern aesthetics and art. Names of artists such as Bortnyik, Uitz, and Kassák; of critics such as Kállai and Kemény; and of dozens of poets, writers and other progressive cultural figures were common copy in the advanced periodicals of the epoch. Moreover, contemporaneous art history and philosophical debate were themselves profoundly enriched by the contributions of Hungarian thinkers who advocated in their writings and declaimed in their lectures the dynamic aesthetics (and often, politics) of their fellow countrymen. In this regard, we need only be reminded of such universally acknowledged creative minds as Charles de Tolnay, Arnold Hauser, Frederick Antal, Leo Popper, Georg Lukács among a host of others well-known in the West.

What might account, then, for this momentous shift from the ready recognition of Hungarian accomplishment early in our century to the relative obscurity today? Why is it that the extraordinary exhibition "Standing in the Tempest: Painters of the Hungarian Avant-Garde 1908–1930" on its American tour in 1991–92 and this related symposium are such remarkable and noteworthy undertakings?

First, I think we must recognize that both the exhibition and this conference are serious attempts to reclaim an essential dimension of modern cultural and intellectual history. This history, I hasten to stress, does not belong exclusively or even primarily to Hungary. Neither the artists we have presented in the

exhibition devoted to Hungarian avant-garde art nor the intellectuals we will examine here saw themselves as limited by the ever-contracting borders of Hungary. Their focus and their affinity was with modern aesthetics and culture in general, and was never limited to the societies of the Carpathian Basin. They recognized themselves as internationalists for whom their own Magyar traditions and heritage provided a distinctive perspective and unique viewpoint from which they might shape a better universal culture. Thus, the exhibition organizers and the conference speakers are collectively undertaking to reacquaint us with a crucial component of our cultural history, an essential chapter that has been for more than a half-century largely obscured from our appreciation.

To a considerable extent, we must acknowledge that the turbulence of the last fifty years has done more than merely obscure the signal accomplishments of the Hungarian avant-garde. One might well argue that the entire culture of "Mitteleuropa" has been overwhelmed by the tumultuous events of political history, to the extent that this entire region (geographical as well as cultural) has been forcibly propelled from the center of our consciousness to the periphery of Western awareness. In this violent dislocation, Hungary – like so much of East-Central Europe – had been assigned to a so-called (by the West, at least) "Eastern Europe", where until relatively recently it lost not only its direct contacts with the West but even its essential connection to its own avant-garde past. Thus, those Hungarian artists and their apologists whom we in the West know best are those who elected emigration or whose work entered early into the modernist mainstream. Those consequential figures who chose in the mid-1920s to live in Hungary – or to emigrate to the Soviet Union – have had their achievements largely erased from popular recognition – at least until recently.

It is also true that some responsibility for the subsequent eclipse of the Hungarian avant-garde and its progressive culture is due to the nature, attitudes, and actions of the artists and intellectuals themselves. Always standing in the political opposition, successively to the Habsburg Monarchy, to the subsequent revolutionary regimes, to the ultramontane government of conservative reaction, to the German occupiers, and to the post-World War II communist system, the artists rarely saw their work broadly endorsed or their accomplishments seriously recognized, studied, or celebrated. In fact it has just been in the last decade or so that the rich heritage of the avant-garde has been fully acknowledged by Hungarian scholars and its art widely exhibited to the public. Moreover, it is only now that a large, freely interpretive exhibition on the Hungarian avant-garde has been mounted in the West, namely the extraordinary exhibition organized by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

In addition to these issues affecting the reception in the West of the Hungarian contribution, we should also recognize that unlike almost every other contemporaneous art movement, Hungarian society tolerated, at times even appeared to encourage, diversity in style and breadth in outlook. Whereas, for example, the Dutch *De Stijl* Group or the Russian *Suprematists* insisted upon a purity of formal expression, the Hungarian adopted a much more heterogenous perspective, not infrequently promoting expressionism, futurism, cubism, and constructivism. Indeed, one finds among the Activist artists, only to cite the best known Hungarian grouping, painters representing a panoply of early twentieth century styles, though simultaneously subscribing to a relatively uniform socialist world view. With such diversity, it was always difficult for progressive Hungarian culture to speak with a single voice, despite the claims of such persuasive spokesmen as Lajos Kassák, Béla Uitz, Sándor Bortnyik, among others. Thus, the numerous texts and works of art notwithstanding, Hungarian avant-garde culture has proven to be, paradoxically, difficult to characterize easily or succinctly by historians and critics. Additionally, many of the important documents written by and about the avant-garde appeared in Hungarian, thereby interposing a language barrier between the artists (and much of their work) and the vast majority of Western scholars and public. Admittedly, most Hungarian intellectuals spoke additional languages, primarily German; however, all sought during their formative years in Hungary and later during their first years in exile (principally) in Vienna and Berlin to maintain their contact both with one another and with the motherland. And to do this, the Hungarian language was frequently employed. Finally, it should be stated that the Hungarians often acted as the link or bridge between the dynamic developments in Eastern Europe and the West. And even though their own contributions were distinctive and significant, too often these accomplishments were assigned to those other artists and movements whose work, ideas, and achievements the Hungarians were both promoting and adapting to their own ends.

It is among the principal objectives of both the U. S. exhibition and the conference, then, to reclaim the manifold contributions of modern Hungarian culture and society from the historical obscurity from which they have suffered in the West (and indirectly, in the East as well), not as a celebration of cultural or national chauvinism but as a responsible way of understanding more accurately and more fully the rich and complex history of modern aesthetics and the social values to which it gave rise. As a result, the papers presented in Santa Barbara and published here both document and assess critically the accomplishments as well as the shortcomings of modern Hungarian culture and society in order to interpret more proficiently the fundamental structures of our own contemporary social environment and intellectual life.

In order to focus on the most significant developments and signal works, we have limited this interpretive assessment of Hungarian modernism principally to the years between 1908 and 1930. These roughly twenty years embrace the period of greatest accomplishment for the Hungarian avant-garde; for it was in these years that the artists and their apologists developed a progressive means of expression and concomitant political and social world view that achieved a stunning degree of clarity and forcefulness. Moreover, it was exactly in these years that Hungarian avant-garde art engendered its decisive impact on the evolution of modern art and created an image of an ideal society. Thus, we acknowledge as our temporal frame of reference the year 1908, when a group of approximately eight Hungarian painters with emphatically progressive aesthetic, social, and stylistic tendencies coalesced, and the year 1930 by which time the heroic period of experimentation, accomplishment and dissemination had largely exhausted itself. Of course, by no means did progressive Hungarian art and social aspiration cease in 1930. Nevertheless, by this date the conditions in Hungary compelled those artists and intellectuals who had been its leading figures to re-appraise their assertive role in avant-garde activity; and many withdrew from engaged aesthetics, thereby paving the way for a new generation of artists and thinkers who would distinguish themselves by their formal experimentation. Moreover, for those members of the Hungarian avant-garde who had elected to remain abroad, 1930 marked the approximate end of their close association with their fellow Hungarian artists as joint participants in a collective movement. By this date many who had moved to the West had begun to distance themselves from a strong identification as Hungarian émigré artists and to engage their energies upon furthering their independent careers, or had become identified with other movements or international groups. As a consequence, many began to jettison (or at least to moderate) much of their ideological commitment and idealistic world view of the preceding twenty years, a fact that is also observable among almost all the pioneers of international modernist culture just before 1930. Nonetheless, the innovative formal solutions they brought to the fine arts, industrial design, architecture, and to the discourse on art and culture in general, as well as the humane pedagogy they introduced into the teaching of art betray their indebtedness to the heroic period of the Hungarian avant-garde when progressive art was perceived as *THE* potent agent of social analysis and reconstruction. Among those numerous Hungarians who returned to their homeland during the course of the 1920s, contemporary political and social conditions grew increasingly hostile towards propagating the tenets and forms of modern art. By the end of the decade, the most innovative phase of Hungarian avant-garde expression was over. Even for those Hungarians for

whom a radical social commitment remained undiminished and who sought asylum and opportunity primarily in the Soviet Union, the 1930s became a period of restricted activity, limited artistic experimentation, and frequent disappointment. The freedom and responsibility they sought to exercise in the service of socialist aesthetics proved anathema to Stalin's conception of radical art.

Despite the brief quarter-century span of mature creativity, the Hungarian avant-garde left a profound legacy which is of particular significance to an American audience. Not only was the morphology of modern art shaped by the distinctive character of Hungarian expressionism, constructivism, and futurism; but the very terms of aesthetic discourse were largely defined by Hungarian avant-garde theorists, critics, and artists. The expansive idealistic – often utopian – world view they articulated fostered a fully humanistic conception of the social responsibilities of modern art and the moral obligations of the contemporary intellectual. It is this largeness of vision and depth of humanity that we witness in the pioneering exhibition, *Standing in the Tempest: Painters of the Hungarian Avant-Garde, 1908–1930*, and which constitute the subject of the deliberations in this volume.