

JÁNOS GYÖRGY SIMON: TABAN, 1923

BY FERENC MATITS



János György Simon: *Taban*, 1923.
Oil on canvas, 111×76 cm
Unsigned
Inv.: 74.84 T



János György Simon: *Taban*, 1923.
Charcoal on paper, 380×270 mm
Signed lower right: G. Simon 923
Inv.: F. 96.27

During the 1960s and 1970s art historians like Júlia Szabó, Krisztina Passuth and Lajos Németh worked to bring a group of painters called The Eight, the Hungarian Avant-garde of the early twentieth century, back into public focus. Among those long-overlooked artists was Sándor Galimberty (1883–1915). Galimberty, who had a Trieste background through his father, was a pupil of István Réti and had worked at the Nagybánya Artists' Colony. He and his wife Valéria Dénes (1877–1915), also a painter, were living in Paris when war broke out in 1914. They fled to neutral Holland to avoid internment. Tragically,

they both died there the following year. Much of the work Galimberty left behind in Paris was presumed lost or destroyed, and his premature death meant that his name had been largely forgotten.

Scholars looking for a significant work to enlarge the Galimberty oeuvre were inclined to attribute the painting *Taban* to him. It has certain similarities with Galimberty's style in its treatment of buildings. Valéria Dénes's sister, the authoress Zsófia Dénes, who had herself been in Paris before the First World War and was the only living person to have seen most of Galimberty's work, believed *Taban*

was by her brother-in-law. But the signature on the painting had been erased (leaving visible evidence of the forgers' unscrupulous activity). It was displayed as a Galimberti in the Hungarian Activism exhibition at the Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs, in 1973 (the owner being József Frankfurt) and referred to as such in the catalogue for the 33rd BAV Auction the following year. The Hungarian National Gallery (HNG) acquired the painting at this auction.¹

Dating it around 1913, the HNG displayed *Taban* on several occasions. Moreover, it was featured on the cover of a small 1979 publication about Sándor Galimberti and Valéria Dénes by Zsófia Dénes. Catalogued under Galimberti in the HNG permanent collection, its attribution appeared to be finalised.² The work's importance was underlined when it was selected for a major exhibition of Hungarian Avant-garde art seen at three locations in the United States between 1991–1993, and indeed reproduced as a full-page frontispiece to the exhibition catalogue.³

Parallel to this travelling show, a commemorative exhibition of work by János György Simon (Jean-Georges Simon, 1894–1968) opened at the National Széchényi Library in December 1991.⁴ It featured drawings, prints and paintings by Simon, mostly from Hungarian collections. Among the exhibits, a painting entitled *City Detail*⁵ bore a striking resemblance in style, form and colour to *Taban*. When the two paintings were eventually put side by side in Budapest to be examined by art historians and specialist restorers a majority of those present agreed the works must be from the same hand. It was accepted that the pencil inscription SG on the stretcher could equally indicate Georges Simon or Sándor Galimberti. It helped when Prof. Krisztina Passuth, who put the counter-arguments to my doctoral thesis on Simon's oeuvre, did not reject my hypothesis on the painting's attribution. Fortunately another doctoral thesis being prepared at the time by Melinda Géger on the work of Sándor Galimberti arrived at the conclusion, on the basis of close analysis of style, that *Taban* was painted after Galimberti's death – very probably in the early 1920s.⁶

So just how did János György Simon come to paint *Taban*? Simon, born of Hungarian parents in Trieste, the principal port of the Austro–Hungarian Monarchy, began his studies in the architectural school of Budapest Technical University in 1912. The following year he shifted to the Academy of Fine Arts, where he studied until he was drafted on the outset of the First World War. He had spent the summers of 1913 and 1914 with his master, István Réti, at the Nagybánya Artists' Colony in Transylvania. Back from the war, he joined the Budapest Haris-street Free School in 1918 where, among others, he was taught by József Rippl-Rónai.

In 1920 he travelled to Switzerland and was invited to enter several works in the 1920–21 International Exhibition of Modern Art in Geneva. His first Budapest

exhibition was a one-man show at the Helikon Gallery in 1923. According to the catalogue and reviews there were several works of the Taban area of Budapest (cleared in the 1930s) in the 11 oils, 30 chalk drawings and 137 drawings displayed. Subsequently, his name crops up almost annually at Budapest group shows. After living in Switzerland, Italy and – for almost a decade – in Paris, he settled in England shortly before the Second World War. His final visit to Budapest, accompanied by his English wife Patricia, was in the spring of 1938 for a one-man exhibition at the Fränkel Gallery. In 1940 he was awarded the Mihály Zichy Graphics Prize in absentia by the Szinyei Merse Society. However, despite an exhibition at the Redfern Gallery, London, in 1945, he was little heard-of in the post-war years. He lived mainly in Yorkshire, dying in Leeds in November 1968.⁷ Simon's work in pastels, wash, ink and charcoal made in Switzerland during the early 1920s and in Paris from 1925 contains expressive pieces which depict hillsides, buildings and trees similar to those in the painting *Taban*.

When I showed photographs of Simon's work to the late Júlia Szabó, perhaps the most influential expert on Hungarian Activism, her response was unexpected. Admitting that she was speaking against herself – because she had been a member of the committee which attributed *Taban* to Galimberti – she encouraged me, with this new photographic evidence, to hope that works would surface proving that Simon had painted *Taban*. Full of empathy and professional honesty, she suggested an individual research project by which a significant work of art could be satisfactorily placed in an oeuvre little-known even to professional circles.

The privately-owned work displayed in the 1991 commemorative exhibition supported the hypothesis. But the issue was resolved once and for all when a charcoal drawing, a preliminary cartoon for *Taban*, was put into the 1996 BAV Auction.⁸ The sketch contains several elements that were not included or were modified in the painting, but there is no doubt that the two works are by the same hand. Art historians and other experts attending the Nagybánya Conference at Szombathely in 1997 accepted the logic of the paper I read there on Simon's work, accompanied by some 25 slides. The conference papers, published as a volume of essays, endorsed this conclusion.⁹

The time is now right for a full assessment of János György Simon. The 1973 memorial exhibition at Wakefield City Art Gallery presented a substantial body of work from the English period. Mrs Lois Smith, who was bequeathed a large part of that work together with the Simon archives by the artist's widow, has been instrumental in creating the Jean-Georges Simon Trust. Its mission is to find a way of bringing the continental and English work together in permanency. A positive first step will be a retrospective at the Ernst Museum, Budapest, scheduled for 2007.

NOTES

- 1 The 33rd BAV Auction, Budapest, May 21, 1974, item no.: 70.
- 2 Geza Csorba (ed.): *20. szazadi magyar festeszet es szobrasatzat. A Magyar Nemzeti Galeria allando kiallításának katalogusa (20th-century Hungarian Painting and Sculpture: the Catalogue of the Permanent Exhibition of the Hungarian National Gallery)*. Kepzomuveszeti Kiado, Budapest 1986, cat. no.: 206, repr. no.: 31 (coloured). Further reproductions in: Lajos Nemeth (ed.): *Magyar Muveszet 1890–1919 (Hungarian Art 1890–1919)*, vol. II, Budapest, 1981, p. 526; last reproduction: *Magyar Nagylexikon (Hungarian Grand Encyclopaedia)*, vol. 8, Budapest, 1999, p. 443 (coloured).
- 3 Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Nelson Atkins Museum, Kansas City; Krannert Art Museum, Champaign; see Steven A. Mansbach (ed.): *Standing in the Tempest: Painters of the Hungarian Avant-garde 1908–1930*, Santa Barbara Museum of Art (California)–MIT Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts), London, 1991. Repr. as frontispiece.
- 4 To supplement the Hungarian material, items no. 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 44, and 46 were brought from Britain. The subsequent Simon exhibitions in Baja and Kecskemet (1992) included larger selections from Britain. *Jean-Georges Simon/Simon Gyorgy Janos (1894–1968). Emlekkiallítás (Commemorial exhibition)*. Orszagos Szechenyi Konyvtar, Budapest, December 16, 1991–February 15, 1992.
- 5 Item no.: 15. *Varosreszlet (City Detail)*, 1922, oil on canvas, 65×50 cm, signed lower right-hand corner: G. Simon (on the back side too). Repr. in: Matits Ferenc: *A menekulo muvesz (The Artist Escaping)*, *Uj Muveszet*, 1992/8, pp. 43–46.
- 6 Melinda Geger: *Galimberty Sandor es Nagybanya (Sandor Galimberty and Nagybanya)*. In: Laszlo Jurecsko and Zsolt Kishonthy (eds.): *Tanulmanyok a nagybanyai muveszet korebol (Studies in Nagybanya Art)*, MissionArt Galeria, Miskolc, 1994, pp. 50–51. Melinda Geger, the curator of the Galimberty commemorative exhibition at the Rippl-Ronai Museum in Kaposvar in 2004, did not select *Taban* for display.
- 7 On Simon see D. Child: *Painters in the Northern Countries of England and Wales*, Leeds, 1994, p. 197; *Biografisches Lexikon der Schweizer Kunst*, vol. II, Zurich, 1998, p. 974; E. Benezit: *Dictionnaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs*, Nouvelle Edition, vol. 12, Paris, 1999, p. 823.
- 8 The 29th BAV Auction, October 1996. *Taban*, charcoal on paper, 380×270 mm, signed lower right-hand corner: G. Simon 923. Hungarian National Gallery, inv.: F. 96.27.
- 9 Ferenc Matits: *Attribucios javaslat a Magyar Nemzeti Galeria Galimberty Sandor Taban címu kepenek szerzoisegere (A Proposal for the Attribution of Authorship Regarding the Painting Entitled Taban by Sandor Galimberty in the Hungarian National Gallery)*. Nagybanya Conference, Szombathely Gallery, Szombathely, 1997, pp. 87–88. Discussed in further detail in: Ferenc Matits: *Toprenges a mugyujtes es mumeghatarozas nehezsegein (Reflections on the Difficulties of Art Collection and Artwork Identification)*. *artmagazin*, 2003/1, pp. 40–44.