

REPRESENTING *WHICH* PAST?

BICENTENNIAL REFLECTIONS ON MUSEUMS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY HUNGARY

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In 2002, Hungary celebrated the bicentennial of the foundation of its National Museum. As the initial, universal collections branched off into a range of specific museums during the later 19th century, this development characterised the successes and failures of the whole of the “museum idea” in this Central European country of a belated but rapid modernisation. The astounding number of museums in Hungary – founded primarily in the half-century preceding the Great War – betrayed considerable diversity in their focus upon universal vs. national values, as much as upon a didactic vs. a scholarly mission. Much of this variety has been forgotten, although quite a few of its benefits are worth reviving today.

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In Western museums discourse interest in the socio-political factors that shaped the foundation of museums in the modern age has multiplied in recent decades. Now, with some delay, a similar surge in researching the complexity of nineteenth-century museum foundations can be observed in Eastern Europe. In Hungary, this development is reinforced by publications and exhibitions on the bicentennial of the “museum idea,” which is traced back to the initiation of the *National Museum* in 1802. Also, as cultural policy and private patrons are beginning to look at Hungarian museums differently today, many a public collection – such as the *Museum of Ethnography*, which celebrated its 130th birthday just last year – is changing its profile by activating some of its own, partly forgotten, traditions. Thus, re-examining the museums’ roots in the past often has current, pragmatic connotations.*

Much of this re-assessment revolves around typically Eastern European questions: with how much of a delay after the Western precedents were Hungarian

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museums established, and how efficiently did they adopt the leading foreign patterns? Thus, for instance, the *Museum of Applied Arts* – which was first allotted an independent budget in 1872 – justly prides itself on having closely followed the British and Austrian public collections in the decorative arts, and thus preceded other museums of its kind in Europe. While such comparisons have their value, the following presentation proposes a different approach. Instead of judging Hungarian museums by an assumed universal standard, why not look at them in their diversity?

The word “museum” has been applied to a number of public collections only in retrospect. Today we use this umbrella notion for a variety of institutions, yet we must be aware of the fundamental differences in their – initial and later – function, organisation, and message to the public. There were serious differences with regard to *universal vs. national* collections, and to the focus upon the different layers of *the past vs. the present*, in the individual institutions. Museums adopted different strategies in integrating local and international material; and, while most of them came into being as some kind of a “shrine of memory,” there were important variations in the ways they evoked the past. This paper examines the original structure of museums in Hungary along these two lines, and argues that while nineteenth-century museums typically came into being with a nationalistic message and a focus upon the historical past, Hungarian museums deviated from this in several ways.

To prepare the ground for this different vision, it is worth beginning with the range of museums that were called to life with a commitment to the present, rather than to the past. Although today a traditionalist institution, the Museum of Applied Arts was initially just one of them. Its aim was to promote the visual education of manufacturers and of the visiting public, in order to fuse industrial mass production with aesthetic sensitivity. Born of the idea of William Morris’ “arts and crafts” movement, the MAA in Budapest first served as a depository of production samples for the Design School, housed in the same building. Objects of the past were collected and shown as items of instruction for the craftsmen of the present. At the Vienna World Exhibition in 1873, the first acquisitions for the MAA embraced contemporary – i.e., historicizing (Revivalist) – objects. Furthermore, its building (1896), a masterpiece of Hungarian Art Nouveau, mobilised geographically and temporally distant motifs in a current design. Only the separation of the school from the museum after the Great War brought a decisive turn – to the art of the past. For all four decades of its operation in the long nineteenth century, the MAA remained a pragmatic center, serving educational schemes of the present. Moreover, while Hungarian applied arts features were highlighted in the exhibitions, the collection had no explicit national focus; and its universal scope was reinforced during the twentieth century.

The *Museum of Technology and Industry* (1882) was likewise established to provide practical instruction, rather than assembling a historical collection. Functioning as a school and research centre for engineers, it facilitated industrial innovation – i.e., the overcoming of the obstacles of the past and the backwardness in the Hungarian economy. Even those portions of the handicrafts collection of the National Museum (initiated in 1808) that were transferred here were used in education. Soon, contemporary industrial items were no longer collected, either, in the assumption that innovation would quickly make them look obsolete; and this institution paid no attention to the “age value” of objects. This precipitated the death of this museum: by its thirtieth anniversary, the institution had surrendered collecting, and turned into a laboratory.

The *Museum of Commerce* (1886) did not care either for, or about, the past at all. Based on an export sample storehouse, it presented a changing permanent exhibition of Hungarian industrial products, and attracted a considerable 200,000 visitors a year – by recurrently showing the latest achievements, and removing from its exhibitions the items produced a few years earlier, as useless remnants of the past. When austerity enforced the closure of the exhibition, however, the historical value of the objects was realised, and they landed in the National Museum (1923). The collections of educational tools in the *Museum of Pedagogy* (1877) experienced a similar fate, when the museum terminated in 1922. By contrast, two further museums of a pragmatic mission – the *Museum of Transport* (1899) and the *Museum of Criminology* (1908) – shifted on their own, over the decades, from being a resource center for contemporary experts in their field, to presenting material of historical interest, and thus were saved from liquidation. Turning into a collection of items of the past offered survival for these museums.

The *Museum of Agriculture* (1896) – which issued from the *Museum of Horticulture* (1869) and the *Museum of Husbandry* (1891) – also had a sophisticated relationship to the past. While initially no more than a model show for farmers, it assumed a central role in representing past agricultural patterns in the Millennium Exhibition (1896) that commemorated the settlement of the Hungarian tribes in the Carpathian Basin a thousand years earlier. From 1907, the permanent exhibition included a diorama-like presentation of 28 so-called “ancient professions” [ősfoglalkozások], such as hunting, fishing and forestry, based on the anthropological collecting trips of Ottó Herman, an instrumental figure in Hungarian paleontology. As a result, the museum was chartered as a scholarly institution (1912) and has flourished since, becoming the largest of its kind in Europe, and being popular with young visitors.

Whilst most of these instances resembled the classic museums only distantly, the exhibitions on agriculture showed a close proximity to those in the Museum of Ethnography. For many decades part of the National Museum, ethnography

developed in Hungary along the parallel lines of national and universal collections. Interest in the “primitive” cultures triggered overseas expeditions, while the search for an “authentic” national culture fostered research into local folk customs. The first ethnographic collection ordered in scholarly taxonomy was that of Hungarian fishery, by Herman, which was revealed in the National Exhibition in 1885, published as a book two years later, and sent to the Paris World Exhibition in 1900.

While ethnological collecting trips to various parts of the world, both by Hungarian aristocrats and by the government-funded museum, continued until the Great War, the museum primarily focused upon Hungarian ethnography. This subsumed saving the contemporary material culture, and the record of the habits, of the peoples of the Carpathian Basin and of those in Europe related to them, as these were threatened by industrialisation and urbanisation. The notion of “national folk heritage” was born when modernisation rapidly dismantled a rural culture that had earlier not been valued on its own, because it had been a given trait for centuries. Now that changing life patterns made these objects and customs disappear, their foreseeable shortness lent value to them. In assembling items then still actively used in peasant households, the museum was saving what was soon to be the future’s past. It suggests the speed of this process – and the hunger of the modern, urban public for an encounter with what they suddenly regarded as their half-exotic “Other” – that the first permanent exhibition of the ethnology of the Carpathian Basin opened as early as 1898. Many of the forms and patterns used by “folk art” (another category freshly invented in Europe just then) were also thought to supply models for the renewal of contemporary applied arts. In this, the scholarly holdings of ethnography were to offer a source of practical inspiration similar to the shows of the MAA.

Ethnography had had from the first moment a distinct interest in re-constructing the linguistic and material elements of the ancient Hungarian past. The holdings of the first expedition to Siberia (1839) and the results of visiting the Finno-Ugric peoples related to the ancestors of the Magyars were inventoried as specimens of natural science in the National Museum – yet soon they were transferred to the Department of Ethnography. Searching for the roots of Hungarians became a hotly debated issue, and the museum turned into a locus for determining some of the key historical (and contemporary) elements of national identity. If ethnography could be related in many respects to the pragmatic missions of other museums, this programme tied it to the activities of the flagship of Hungarian public collections – the National Museum. This connection indicated the politicisation of ethnography. While its status in scholarship was not questioned, ethnography was considered a central tool in governmental self-representation, both to the local population, and to the international audience.

The National Museum was the central site for assembling, identifying and showing items of national identity. Yet its exclusive focus upon Hungarian history took more than a century to settle. While founded in the wake of patriotism in 1802, for most of the nineteenth century it remained a universal collection in two senses. First, until the differentiation of individual museums from the 1870s onwards, its collections covered all areas of scholarship, from mineralogy to the arts, and a focus upon history became exclusive in the twentieth century only. Second, until well after the Great War, the museum was “national” as an institution, rather than in its collections that incorporated much universal material. Until the 1870s, historical and other scholarly material, as much as items of Hungarian and those of universal relevance were accumulated side by side. For most of the nineteenth-century, these groups of objects were exhibited together, so that the public had no encounter with an isolated reconstruction of the past as “history,” nor did it see Hungarian material separate from its universal counterparts.

The preferences of key figures in the museum’s history – such as founder Count Ferenc Széchenyi, major donator Miklós Jankovich (1836), and the most charismatic director Ferenc Pulszky (1869–1897) – oscillated between an attention to “hungarica” as opposed to universal holdings. If the museum’s task was seen in strengthening the patriotic cohesion of Hungarians as an “imagined community,” just being born of the nationalism of the age, then a local focus seemed justified. Yet, if the museum was to be a scholarly institution with an educational function, in the forefront of European museums, to familiarise the public with various civilisations, then its “national” responsibility implied not to be bent upon the provincial, but rather to re-invent it in the context of the universal. This issue – whether a museum is “national” by virtue of its collections or by its ownership and constituency that may well request universal exposure – is still alive in Hungary (and elsewhere).

In the nineteenth century, this discussion was carried out mostly in archaeology, the most dynamic field, and (as late as today) the largest department of the National Museum. As a result of the museum’s excavations in Hungarian soil (begun in 1839), and of private donations, the holdings became so significant that Budapest hosted the 8th *International Congress on Ancient Archaeology and Anthropology* in 1876, which was an excellent occasion to present Hungarian findings in a universal context. The idea of a full-fledged Egyptian and an Antique Collection, separate from holdings coming from the territory of Hungary, arose at the turn of the century, but materialised rather slowly in the *Museum of Fine Arts* (established 1896), and accelerated only from the 1930s onwards. The first original Antiquities were not acquired for the MFA before 1907, when Antal Hekler – who had completed his doctorate with Furtwängler in Munich just then – bought parts of the Arndt Collection from Germany. For most of the nineteenth century,

museum acquisitions of antiquities were restricted in Budapest to plaster casts of architectural and artistic icons ranging from the Greco-Roman times to the Renaissance, as the Hungarian government financed no more than these copies, used as an educational trajectory.

In contrast, international acclaim for Hungarian archaeologists, and the growing local interest in saving the treasures of the distant past hidden in Hungarian soil, boosted archaeological research in the Hungarian provinces from the late 1850s. Spurred by the Benedictine priest and scholar Flóris Rómer in Győr, a stunning series of provincial museums – among them around fifty of lasting importance – were founded all over the country. They focused upon either local ethnicity (Balassagyarmat, Jászberény) or the archaeology of their region (Nyíregyháza, Székesfehérvár). Intake of classical antiquities was exceptional, such as the purchase by Békés County in 1873 of the Etruscan and Roman items of painter Gyula Haan, which he had put together in Italy. Other local museums specialised in ethnography (Hódmezővásárhely), geology (Veszprém), natural history (Miskolc), or centred around a sizeable library (Szeged). Clerical collections (Eger, Esztergom, Pannonhalma) were outstanding in the fine arts, not least because they combined a universal scope with preserving the treasures of the Gothic and the Renaissance in churches in Hungary, threatened with physical decay.

The capital also featured its own local collection, the *Municipal Museum* of Budapest (1887). As systematic excavations of the Roman remains in the city's territory (Aquincum) were launched, from the 1870s, and the medieval parts of Buda Castle were unearthed, from the 1880s, agreement was reached with the National Museum that these holdings were to be administered by the Municipal Museum. Thus, Budapest, a young metropolis – a unified city only since 1873 – received a chance to construct its own historical past, as part of a wider national narrative, which was *per se* part of universal history, as well. Items of the past assumed different meanings on each of these three levels. In addition, Budapest soon became receptive towards its contemporary culture, too, and the Municipal Museum was the first among local museums to collect and exhibit artworks by living artists.

Public art collections, on the whole, had a slow rise in nineteenth-century Hungary, and sorely exemplified the divisions between national and universal, as well as historical and contemporary values. The first permanent public art gallery opened as late as 1846, as a fruit of donations of Old Masters to the National Museum. Soon, works by living Hungarian painters – working at that time mostly abroad – were acquired. However, the public comprehension of the classical and of contemporary works remained fundamentally different. Just as the notion of the “museum” is applied to diverse institutions in retrospect, that of “art” subsumes these holdings under one and the same cover only today. Classical works – mostly by

foreign masters, as a secular practice of art had been present in Hungary not for long – came from aristocratic and clerical collections (Pyrker, Ipolyi, and Esterházy Collections), and from a concerted series of state-funded purchases by Károly Pulszky in Italy in 1893/1894. These works were valued for their aesthetic, while the nineteenth-century Hungarian allegoric, academic and history paintings were tools in conjuring national sentiments and enlivening dramatic points of the heroic past. When further additions came, these works were grouped separately, and the classical masterpieces were put on show in the newly built *Hungarian Academy of Sciences* (1865).

Until the completion of the *Museum of Fine Arts* (1906), an “art museum” in the modern sense operated only in the Academy, whereas the public art galleries of the National Museum drew many visitors – for the illustrative-emotional effect of the paintings shown. Although these rooms in the National Museum presented some nineteenth-century foreign masters, as well (mostly from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy), Hungarian art dominated this patriotic show, which was rather similar to a national pantheon and was called the *National Picture Gallery* (1851–1906), until it merged into the new MFA. Thus, universal art concentrated in the Old Masters collections, kept separately, whereas Hungarian masters determined the public vision of living art. This local art of the present was instrumental in constructing and disseminating the images of the (idealised) national past, yet its separation from the exhibition of classical European art drove a wedge between the aesthetic standards applied to the universal as opposed to the patriotic context of the Hungarian works. Although the twentieth century brought numerous variations in Hungarian museums on combining classical and modern, and Hungarian and international art, their comprehension and aesthetic value have remained rather different to date.

This conflict of local and universal art also characterised the exhibition record of institutions that had no permanent collection, and were thus not chartered as proper museums, yet played a seminal role in national representation as much as in public visual education. The *Exhibition Hall* (first erected 1871, then rebuilt in a new location in 1896) and the *National Salon* (1907) were the major public galleries, but it was often the smaller institutions – such as the *Artists House* (1909) and the *Ernst Museum* (1912) – that invited more international art shows. The closest approximation of universal aesthetic standards was achieved in Hungary in private collections, which rivalled those of Western cultural centres until after the Great War.

In conclusion, museums in nineteenth-century Hungary betrayed considerable diversity in their establishment and function. The representation of the past was a key task of many of them, and this often focused upon constructing a specifically national past – the traits of national identity and heritage. Nonetheless, not all collections had a national focus. In fact, the twentieth century was to bring a

closer commitment to national values in Hungarian museums, as the two lost World Wars increased the financial and ideological pressures upon most of them to represent the local past, and separate national exhibitions from those of universal collections. With the Great War, the “golden age” of Hungarian museums – from the 1870s to the 1910s – ended abruptly, and their universal engagement was restricted drastically, never quite to recover.

In a first wave, from the early 1920s to the 1940s, the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy severely diminished the constituency of Hungarian museums, and the truncation of the country brought financial incapacity to acquire works from the international art market. A shift towards conservative values in cultural policy increased the attention to exhibitions of national interest. Second, the Communist take-over after World War II further isolated Hungarian museums internationally. Thus, overall Hungarian museum development may be understood as an opposite to generic shifts in museums in the Western hemisphere over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Whereas museums internationally rose on the tide of nationalism in the nineteenth century, and became more cosmopolitan in the twentieth, Hungarian museums reared a wider universal focus in the nineteenth century than they could afford in the twentieth century.

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