

Mónika Szente Varga:  
**THE ROLE OF  
GÉZA MARÓTI AND OTHER  
HUNGARIAN ARTISTS  
IN THE CONSTRUCTION  
OF THE NATIONAL  
THEATRE OF MEXIKO**

The Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts) – originally the Mexican National Theatre – is not only one of the most frequently visited and photographed buildings in Mexico City, but also a centre of Mexican cultural life, a national symbol. (Ill. 1) Many artists from abroad took part in its construction, which lasted for three decades. The role of the French and the Italians in the creation of the theatre is well known and documented. But the Hungarian contribution is now largely forgotten, in Hungary and in Mexico alike.

One year after the theatre's foundation stone had been laid, Adamo Boari, the architect in charge of the project, travelled to Europe accompanied by senior Mexican government officials. Their mission was to find artists capable of completing the tasks remaining. During its European tour the party visited the 1906 Milan World Exhibition, where they became familiar with work by Géza Maróti, Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch, Ede Telcs, and many other Hungarian artists. Boari immediately offered a contract to the young Maróti, who, after a short hesitation, accepted the Mexican commission.

The following works of the Palace of Fine Arts can be linked to Hungarian contractors, primarily to Géza Maróti. These are the stained-glass ceiling of the auditorium, the mural mosaic over the proscenium arch, the group of sculptures embellishing the top of the building, and the design of the glass stage-curtain.

Mexico awarded three commissions in connection with the designs for the embellishment of the auditorium and the making of the models showing these designs. The commissions went to Tiffany of New York, to G. Beltrami of Milan and to G. Maróti of Budapest. According to Adamo Boari, "Géza Maróti presented the best designs." However, these designs were not accepted in their totality and for the time being Mexico placed orders for the execution of the glass ceiling and the mosaic arch only. The glass ceiling, a real masterpiece of Art Nouveau, covers the auditorium. The theme of the composition is Apollo and the Nine Muses. Apollo stands in the middle amidst sunbeams and bears palm leaves symbolising peace. The Muses surround him "with a wreath of wings which touch in the middle, a wreath which lends an ethereal and floating effect to the entire ceiling." (Ill. 2) Apollo is 5 metres in height and each of the Muses is 4.5 meters. Standing on a high ladder, Maróti drew up the plans on a 1:1 scale. Miksa Róth executed these plans, employing a colour scheme of his

own. Having been dismantled, the glass ceiling – then the largest in the world – was delivered in the form of parts to Mexico. Not one of these was broken during the long journey. Maróti also undertook the design of the iron frame for the cupola, commissioning a Hungarian engineering works to produce it. The structure was re-assembled in Mexico in 1917.

The Art Nouveau mosaic arch had a surface of 55 square metres and an approximate length of 20 metres. (Ill. 3) Art historians have been accustomed to describe the theme of the composition as the history of the dramatic arts, although Maróti wrote in his memoirs merely that it "contained everything that was good and costly". The main figures of the mosaic arch are Dante; Tancred; Medea; Jason with the Golden Fleece; Greek warriors; virgins making music; Nibelungs; Hamlet; a French revolutionary; and, among deer, a figure symbolising folk ballads. In the middle we find three Muses. The background of the mosaic is Venetian *oro granuloso*. The eosin beads embellishing the aureoles of the Muses were made at the Zsolnay Factory in Pécs, as were some of the decorative eosin insets between the festoons. Miksa Róth executed the mosaic. At the same time the person of the designer was himself the subject of mention. In the bottom left-hand corner of the mosaic there are three names: those of Miksa Róth, Géza Maróti and Aladár Körösfői. According to the recollections of Dóra Bródy-Maróti, the artist's daughter, Körösfői drew up the first design. This, however, failed to win the approval of Maróti, who made a new one. According to Maróti and his daughter, Körösfői had nothing to do with the mosaic. His name, however, is on it. Maróti himself mentions that Körösfői helped in the coloration. Moreover, although we know that Maróti did not like the first design, it could have exerted an influence on him, and he could even have borrowed elements of it. The coloured plans for the composition are kept at the Museum of Architecture in Budapest. It is important to remember that when Maróti was commissioned to embellish the theatre hall at the workers' hostel in Csepel in 1918, he again used this design.

Géza Maróti was commissioned to make the sculptural group for the cupola following an international competition. Participants included Augustín Querol, Leonardo Bistolfi, Antonin Mercié, and others. Maróti's design was executed in the studio operated by Ármin and Ferenc Steiner. Also involved in the execution was

the studio operated by Gyula Jungfer, as we know from Maróti's memoirs. The work was completed in Budapest by late 1909, and was transported to Mexico the following March. Interestingly, the group was mounted on the building in the year of its arrival (1910), although the ceramic tiles of the roof were put on only in the early 1930s, prior to the opening of the building to the public in 1934. In this way the cold, metal frame was embellished by the sculptures alone for some twenty years; they can clearly be seen on old photographs. The sculpture consists of three parts. The first is the pedestal itself. On it are placed female figures 9 metres high symbolising Music, Song, Tragedy, and Dance. On the very top (the third level) is situated the eagle of Mexico. (Ill. 4) The eagle was a prominent element in the legend of the origin of the Aztecs, since their ancestors had to settle on the spot where they found such a bird perched on a nopal cactus and tearing at a snake. They encountered this phenomenon on the shores of Lake Texcoco, and their capital, Tenochtitlán (the forerunner of Mexico City), was eventually founded there in the 14th century. Apart from the design of the stage-curtain, this group of sculptures was the only work in which Maróti used a Mexican theme, because – as he writes – it seemed from the letters he received concerning the plans for embellishment that his Mexican customer did not support the employment of native motifs. Maróti drew up the first design of the glass curtain in 1908, based on an idea by Adamo Boari. This design shows a Mexican landscape with cacti and other indigenous plants; in the background are the volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl. Two years later Miksa Róth completed a model of the curtain on a scale of 1:10, but Mexico entrusted the execution of the design on the full scale to the Tiffany firm. Maróti thought it was because of the First World War and the communications difficulties to which it gave rise. However, a letter written by Adamo Boari mentions another

cause: "[We ordered] a model of the glass-curtain from Miksa Róth of Budapest, and we paid 700 crowns for it. There was a serious trouble during the tests: the lights of the hall were reflected by the curtain." The Tiffany firm was able to solve this problem, with the result that they won the order to execute the design. The stage-curtain was finished during the First World War. "For more than 15 months 20 workers were constantly engaged on mounting glass cubes of different colours. When it was to be delivered, the curtain was dismantled into 200 panels." It arrived in this form in Mexico City, weighing 27 metric tons and representing \$47,000 in value. The fame of the Tiffany concern obscured the identity of the designer, and the idea soon spread that the design, too, was Tiffany's. Only later was justice done to Maróti. When Ruth Rivera, director of Mexico's National Institute of Fine Arts, visited Hungary in the 1970s, she was shown Géza Maróti's design by Dóra Bródy-Maróti, the daughter of the artist. Because of this, the plaque erected to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Palace of Fine Arts mentions not only Géza Maróti, but also his first design of the glass-curtain. Since it was Mexican architects who eventually completed the project (in the 1930s), many thought that the entire building was Mexican work. The participation of Hungarians was forgotten. The first reference to it came in 1967, although Maróti's name was not mentioned at this time. It fell to the Mexicans to rediscover Maróti's contribution, in the course of research undertaken as part of the celebrations held to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the building (1984). Maróti's name was recorded on the marble plaque erected to mark the occasion. Despite this, most inhabitants of Mexico City – Hungarians and non-Hungarians alike – have no idea of a Hungarian contribution to the construction of the theatre, still less that the contributors were Géza Maróti, Miksa Róth, Aladár Körösfői, and Ede Telcs.