

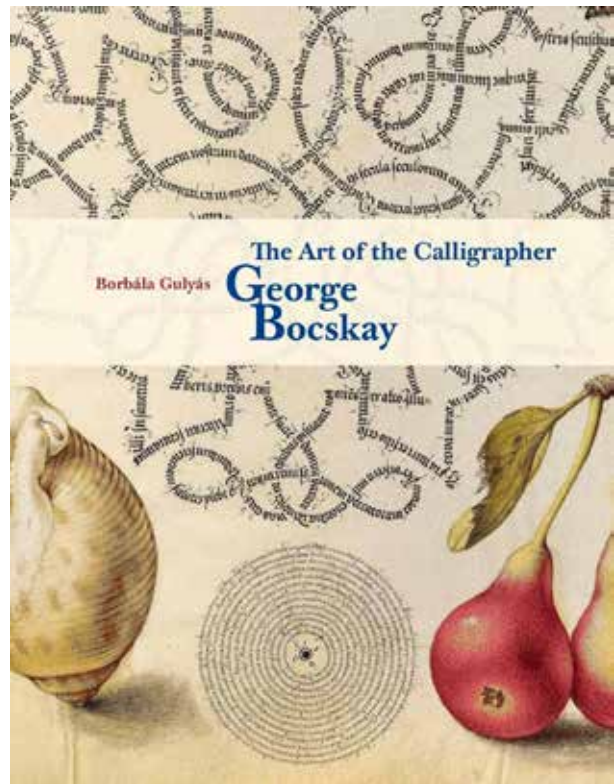
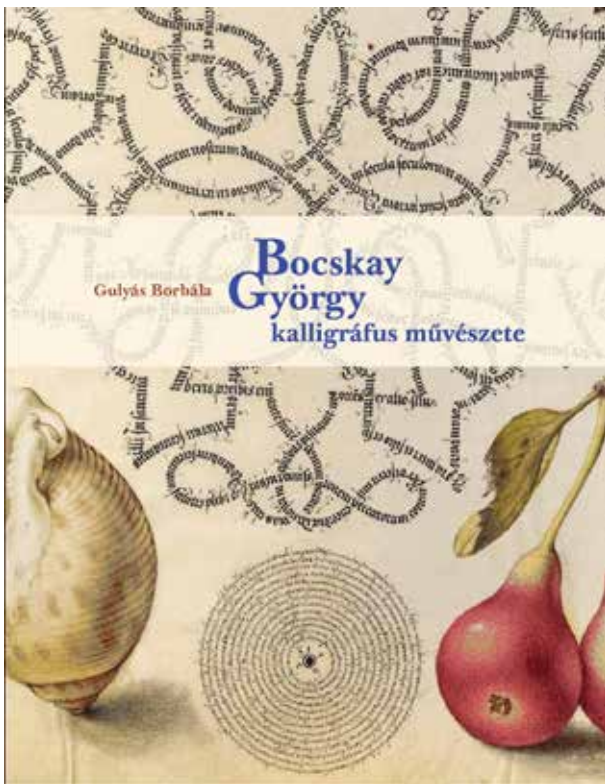
BOOK REVIEW

GULYÁS, Borbála: *Bocskay György kalligráfus művészete*. Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Művészettörténeti Intézet, Budapest, 2020. 366 pages, 11 b/w, 206 color illustrations

Borbála GULYÁS: *The Art of the Calligrapher George Bocskay*. Eötvös Loránd Research Network, Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of Art History, Budapest, 2023. 408 pages, 11 b/w, 208 color illustrations

Borbála Gulyás has written a significant book. The artist discussed in the book was a highly typical figure and the practitioner of a typical genre of the age, but posterity has forgotten him. He is missing from works devoted to the age, even from those in Hungarian, or there is at most a brief mention of him. (Oddly enough, the longer

writings about him in Hungarian are not by art historians.) Though there is mention of him in Hungarian-language art encyclopaedias, but his name is missing from both Thieme–Becker and the Dictionary of Art edited by Jane Turner. It is to be appreciated that Saur's *Allgemeines Künstlerlexikon* includes him.



Cover illustration: George Bocskay – Joris Hoefnagel: *Writing model book*, 1561–1562/1592–1596, fol. 118r, detail. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. 20 (86.MV.527), digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program

It was only after 2000 that a few Hungarian researchers published meaningful information about the artist's life, although Géza Galavics had already discussed his art as well several decades before.¹ In surveys of the late sixteenth-century phase of art in the countries north of the Alps written by non-Hungarians his name rarely crops up, and then only in passing. It was not before an exhibition of 1988 directing the light at the art of Prague of a Late Mannerist flavour² which evolved during Emperor Rudolf II, that we have been able to read considerable articles about him. It has also promoted knowledge of him that a writing model book of his got into the Getty collection of Los Angeles and they deemed it important to publicize it broadly.³ However, Gulyás's is the very first monograph devoted to Bocskay. Her undertaking was truly pioneering: only from now on can we expect to see efforts that try to ascribe his interesting and valuable art its due place in art historical writings.

Though the subject-matter of this review is not the artist but the book named in the title, with a view of the above-said, a brief summary of Bocskay's life is necessary, whose person is very little known – the author must have conducted a lot of basic research.

Little is known of the artist's life, and hardly more of his works including the writing model books he certified with his signature. Gulyás rediscovered (after Béla Iványi) and first published in full the letters patent of the Bocskay family renewed in 1549 (it is reproduced in the book). Her meticulous search led to finding lots of tiny details of his life and career, down to the topic of when his salary was raised by how much (and how many times he had to urge for being actually paid the whole amount), or when he was put up by which Hungarian aristocrat living in Vienna. These minute details could only be gleaned from official notes or private letters, most of them found during archival research.

Bocskay originated from a land-owning family in the middle stratum of the nobility in south-western Hungary (Slavonia, now Croatia), but almost only his activity in Vienna is covered with data. He was an official of the Viennese court, employed by the Hungarian Court Chancellery, at first as a scribe and later as a secretary of the Chancellery with the title royal counsellor. In this capacity as a secretary he was also in charge of the ennoblement of Hungarians and issuing the pertinent deeds. What is of interest to posterity is that he was more than an administrator: he became an artist who designed letters relying on the works of the most noted calligraphers of his age and the recent past,

be they of a mediaeval tone (*Fraktur*) or Italianate, for example Roman *antiqua* characters of a humanistic flavour. The text of his testament and the exact date – 5 April 1575 – of his death are new discoveries, as is the place of his burial in Vienna's *Himmelfortkloster*, which was later demolished. Neither the tomb nor a related inscription survive. (Similarly to the family's letters patent, Gulyás is the first to publish the testament she has found, but in Latin only. True, in her work she gives information about its contents in adequate detail.)

As a calligrapher, Bocskay was highly esteemed in his life, and also after his death. The imperial family had his writing model books kept in the *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* in Vienna later; the cabinet in Prague was the pride of the imperial court and they showed it to particularly highly respected foreign envoys. Two decades after Bocskay's death, in 1591–1594 Emperor Rudolf II had the first and third model books decorated by Joris Hoefnagel, the “last of the Flemish illuminators” with impressively realistic, precise and lively illustrations aimed at trompe l'oeil effect (clearly anticipating the soon unfolding Netherlandish fruit-piece painting). That shows the imperial client's high appreciation of Bocskay, and also of Hoefnagel, who was also acknowledged enough not to have to accept any work. He regarded Bocskay as his equal in art, calling both of them Zeuxis (!) in a poem he wrote in this third volume in Latin. This must have been a prevalent view in the Low Countries: in his collection of artists' lives Karel van Mander wrote that Hoefnagel illustrated the book “of the world's best scribe”.⁴ One more thing about Mannerism, which had some influence on Bocskay a few decades earlier: there was a peculiar later-day flare-up of admiration for it in Prague, just think perhaps of its paragon in art there, Arcimboldo, whom the emperor ennobled, in acknowledgement of his art and significance.

The author allows an insight into the main activity of Bocskay, the art of the finest possible handwriting aimed at an exquisite artistic effect, *ars scribendi*, which became a branch of art by the end of the sixteenth century, into its Italian and German representatives, and how Bocskay was connected to them. He sometimes termed the design of letters and the attractive layout of a page science, and sometimes he called it art; by frequently adding his signature, he overtly followed the artists' widespread custom of signing their works in the sixteenth century. He often added words alluding to his own activity, importance or rank (e.g. *aulicus*, *Notarius... et scriptor Maiestatis*).

Attempts are made by the author to translate into conceptual terms what lends a magic appeal to his beautiful book pages, why his contemporaries honoured him so high. Bocskay's letters appear in beautiful and whimsical forms in an age when printing had squeezed manuscripts out of use decades earlier, but many were still appreciated highly as luxury objects. For the end of a line – or anywhere else on a page to fill a vacant spot he designed fantastic floral ornaments, strapwork, scrollwork, and arabesques, or he hanged ornaments from letters often in lengths that were multiples of the given letters, sometimes he expanded the strokes of a letter into braids, at times faces appeared in them. His initials were sometimes large, ornate, dominating the entire page. Sometimes a single ornamental design provided the background to the page. His virtuosity urged him to try out meandering lines in certain pattern, or writing the letters upside down, or in a spiral line, or writing each letter in reverse (so that a mirror would have to be used next to the book to be able to read it). He did not steer clear of micrography, either; letters of 2 millimetres in size can also be found by him written in an age when glasses, magnifying glass were rare. (This intense urge for decoration is an organic continuation of the efflorescence of manuscripts in the preceding centuries. In the Renaissance period miniatures at times filling the entire page were added with the ambition of the art of painting; in earlier centuries large painted illuminations were rarer, but the paragraph starting initials often with figural motifs and the *bas de page* decorations belonged to all quality manuscripts.)

On lustrous parchment Bocskay sometimes wrote the lines in diverse colours, or in gold and silver, and arranged them to make out special calligrams like a chalice or even a double-headed eagle. Given to bizarreness and extravaganza in its play with forms, Mannerism must be underneath his ambitions to make the lines, besides their beauty, also startling, at times undulating, even to the detriment of readability. With reference to these peculiar solutions did he term himself an artist in his signatures: "I have written it in Vienna for the eternal memory of the art of writing", as he wrote somewhere.

The eminent calligrapher made three writing model books in the capacity of the scribe of the ruler, first of all to delight his majestic patron and his court, but also to be of use for his scribe colleagues. Gulyás looked closely at the model books mentioned in connection with Hoefnagel's illustrations, established their chronology, explored which of them were bound in a

volume in the artist's time and which had to wait several decades for binding. She stressed how fertile the calligrapher was in designing letter types: compared to the hand-written writing model books of his contemporaries with their ten to twenty models, he designed altogether 370 types in the three books.

Still unbound, the first and third could be complemented with Hoefnagel's miniatures. Gulyás describes the volumes in detail; she defines the watermark of the paper used for the endpaper and paper interleaving in the third manuscript as very probably originating in Prague and connects it to the years of Emperor Rudolf II. She traced the further path of the model book: later it received a binding with two bloodstone or heliotrope panels adorned even with grains of garnet – a veritable goldsmith's work: she also explored that its master was Jan Vermeyen, the maker of Rudolf's crown. She also found that the binding being smaller than the sheets, the parchment sheets were subsequently trimmed round, which caused some small damage. The sumptuous goldsmith's binding must also have justified its place in the Prague *Kunstammer*.

About the conspicuously larger model book than the other two, and one of horizontal format, model book no. 2 was found by Gulyás to have been completed as part of the preparations for the inscriptions on emperor Maximilian I's sepulchral monument installed in the Hofkirche of Innsbruck and completed in 1589. To verify her hypothesis, she points at the comparatively large size, landscape format, and that unlike the first model book, it contains conspicuously many Roman *antiqua* letters. The size of the pages, the ceremonious and easily readable classical letter type fitting the imperial dignity correspond to the later applied inscriptions on the monument, which means that Bocskay must have had fairly accurate knowledge of the work he aimed to acquire. He dedicated the model book to Emperor and King of Hungary Ferdinand I, who forwarded it to his son of the same name, then governor of the province of Tyrol in the rank of archduke (Archduke Ferdinand II of Tyrol) and hence the supervisor of the finishing of the monument. It must be the sign of great appreciation that unlike the other two model books, this one received a splendid red leather binding at a very early date, right after it was finished in 1562. It was kept in Ambras near Innsbruck since 1596 at least, in the *Kunstammer* which the archduke of Tyrol founded on the example of his uncle Rudolf II's cabinet, where it was in showcase no. 8 as the inventory book reveals.

The inscriptions were placed above the 24 scenes from the ruler's life on the sides of the cenotaph to

explain them. Bocskay acid-etched the texts into black marble tablets, deepening the letters in subtly roughened and later gilded grooves of about 1 millimetre. This procedure allowed Bocskay to accept the assignment – after all, he was not a stone carver but a letter designer. He must have learnt the technique by himself – at that time there were already printed guides also available in Vienna. The technique borrowed from armourers used for acid-etching design on the smooth surface of armour was still rarely used in the age, and gave Bocskay a lot of headache. It took him five years to complete the inscriptions on the 24 stone tablets. It is to the credit of the high expectations of the designers and commissioners of the cenotaph that they devoted so much care even to a relatively insignificant detail: with Bocskay, they had picked the best possible typographer, and though they urged him from time to time, they could wait years for the marble tablets. His work had great prestige value, as it was for the cenotaph of a highly esteemed ancestor of Ferdinand I, Maximilian I, who had considerably enlarged the territory ruled by the Habsburg dynasty.

It is a noteworthy ambition of the monographer to find links between the sepulchral monument with the inscribed tablets, and the strengthening antiquarian trends in the imperial court at that time, including the Swiss Gate (*Schweizertor*) of the Hofburg (Vienna) constructed a little earlier, the aim of which was to add a Roman triumphal arch to the façade of the imperial residence. She mentions its link to Sebastiano Serlio's architectural treatise. The inscriptions are reminiscent of the bronze letters set in red marble used in classical antiquity with great relish; these were first to appear north of the Alps a century earlier in the humanist capitals of the Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus indicating his aspirations to revive the antiquity, e.g., on the pedestal of a Hercules statue unearthed in Budapest, from which the letters were missing but their grooves clearly reveal their quondam existence. Very early bronze letters are still visible in the Bakócz chapel (1506–1509) added to Esztergom Cathedral in Hungary. Gulyás mentions that for the entries of Emperor Ferdinand I in Vienna, Pozsony and Prague, triumphal arches were erected, of course, only ephemeral ones. Speaking of the background she also mentions the humanists, first of all Wolfgang Lazius connected to the court, the Roman finds found in Vienna, the imperial collection of antique coins, and a single event surpassing all the mentioned ones: the transportation of a classical bronze statue found in Carinthia to the capital city.

Since Bocskay made these sepulchral inscriptions living in the Vienna residence of the Hungarian aristocrat Tamás Nádasdy, it was logical for Gulyás to track his commission to make the similar but much shorter inscriptions of the sarcophagus in Lockenhaus (Léka, now prov. Burgenland, Austria) castle owned by the Nádasdy family in *all'antica*, humanist lettering to their long acquaintance. She also dated these inscriptions in this chapter. Here we first learn a lot of unknown or misunderstood details about the castle and the circumstances of the transfer of the remains of Tamás Nádasdy buried for various reasons elsewhere, and about the re-burial of the family members in the Augustinian church built newly in the town at the foot of the castle. (From the central placement of the sarcophagus of the founder of the new crypt, Ferenc III Nádasdy and his wife, Bálint Ugrý inferred the ambition of the aristocrat to become palatine.⁵) Bocskay's inscriptions were originally made for the sarcophagus of Tamás Nádasdy and his wife, Orsolya Kanizsay placed in the crypt of the castle. In Árpád Mikó's opinion the sepulchral monument is one of the most significant pieces ordered by a sixteenth-century Hungarian person, to which great attention is paid independently of the protagonist of the book. The sarcophagus was made in Vienna, the lid carved by a stone carver of German orientation, the lateral panels by a carver of Italian inclination. (Those who only wish to get in this book a Bocskay monograph may find the discussion of Lockenhaus castle, transfer of the deceased and stylistic analyses of the sarcophagus a bit extensive, but it is most welcome to have now a lot of so-far unknown or erroneous facts in a new light.)

In the above paragraphs the topic was mainly Bocskay's involvement in inscribing funerary monuments, whereas his calligraphic work was pursued unchanged parallel with it. We learn from the book that he made the ornate charters of authenticating the weddings of two Habsburg archduchesses, for their execution closely resembles other works by his hand. Gulyás lists several letters patent of Hungarian nobles that she attributes to him. He, as the secretary of the Hungarian Court Chancellery, was obviously involved in the administrative procedure of their issuing – as they accompanied the ennobling process by the chancellery. Some of them he had to countersign in his capacity as secretary. He also undertook to write a few, for a separate fee. Only the style critical analyses help to recognize the scribe, as they are very rarely signed. In some cases, only certain details of the calligraphy appear to be by Bocskay's hand, in other cases only his

influence is established. This is not such a punctilious job as the exploration of written data, but it implies no less responsibility. Gulyás's undertaking is particularly noteworthy because the stylistic comparison of letters patent and through it the recognition of an artist's hand, are not among the frequently performed tasks of an art historian.

In addition to the art historical investigations in the narrow sense, the thoroughness of the author's work is proven by her reliance on several attendant disciplines and the buttressing of her statements or presumptions with over one thousand notes. So far, researchers mainly

focussed on the early period of Renaissance art in Hungary, now a noteworthy figure of Late Renaissance art has been found worthy of a monographic work.

At the end of the Hungarian book there is a fifteen-page summary in English. The revised and expanded English version of the book was also completed, and was published in 2023.

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NOTES

¹ Géza GALAVICS: *Kössünk kardot a pogány ellen. Török háborúk és a képzőművészet* [Gird your swords against the Pagans. Anti-Ottoman wars and the arts], Budapest 1986, 29.

² *Prag um 1600. Kunst und Kultur am Hofe Kaiser Rudolfs II*, Essen, Villa Hügel (Kulturstiftung Ruhr), 1988. Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1988.

³ Lee HENDRIX – Thea VIGNAU-WILBERG: *Mira calligraphiae monumenta. A Sixteenth-Century calligraphic manuscript inscribed by Georg Bocskay and illuminated by Joris Hoefnagel*, Malibu, Cal. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1992. (2nd edition: Los Angeles, 2020; Berlin, 2020)

⁴ Karel VAN MANDER: *Het schilder-boeck...* Haarlem 1603–04 (facsimile edition and English edition, ed. Hassel MIEDEMA. Doornspijk 1994, I), fol. 263r.

⁵ Bálint UGRY: Egy 17. századi főúri temetkezőhely. Nádasdy Ferenc országbíró és a lékai Ágoston-rendi templom Nádasdy-kriptájának kialakítása [A 17th-century burial place of aristocrats. Chief Justice Ferenc III Nádasdy and the creation of the Nádasdy crypt in the Augustinian church of Léka], *Művészettörténeti Értesítő* 63. 2014, 307–324.

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