

# In memory of Elisabeth Varga

## A personal reflection

*Ferenc Matits*

ELISABETH VARGA (1948-2011), a Dutch sculptor and medallist of Hungarian origin, left us a decade ago. Her memory lives on in the writings of her friends and admirers, in the catalogues of exhibitions that included her works, and in the works themselves in public and private collections and public spaces.

It is not easy to recognise that somebody, with whom we were once good friends, is no longer with us. In time everybody must learn that life is not endless. Luckily, artists survive in the memory beyond their human life thanks to the art that they have created. A little over a decade after the death of Elisabeth Varga (fig. 1), I feel that it is time to review her artistic development and legacy and to recall her charming personality from the perspective of a writer from Hungary.

Varga's works continue to have a profound impact on those who have the opportunity to admire her sculptures and medals. Most recently, one of the artist's works was on view at the exhibition entitled *Destination: Hope*, which opened at the Budapest History Museum in December 2021 and closed in March 2022. This exhibition was held on the centenary of the launch of the International Children's Train Action, by which certain countries agreed to take in temporarily Hungarian children living in difficult social situations after the First World War. Professor Orsolya Réthelyi, one of the creators of the exhibition, discusses Elisabeth Varga's work in the catalogue.<sup>1</sup> The piece in question was a cup commemorating the Dutch admiral Michiel Adriaenszoon de Ruyter (1607-76), made in 2007 (fig. 2). The first example of this piece was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Finance to mark the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of the admiral's birth.<sup>2</sup> With the consent of the admiral's descendants, another example was placed in De Ruyter's mausoleum in Amsterdam's Nieuwe Kerk. Self-evidently, it is a very 'fragile object, but the burial site of the national hero is an area closed to the general public.

Engraved on a replica of a seventeenth-

century glass cup, the medallic representation of the admiral shows him in profile together with his famous ship, the *Seven Provinces*. The most illustrious admiral in Dutch history and a hero of the Anglo-Dutch wars, De Ruyter entered Hungarian history on 12 February 1676, when he rescued a group of Hungarian Protestant clergymen in Naples who had been captured in the Habsburg-ruled Kingdom of Hungary and sold to the galleys because of their religion. The exhibited work was on loan from the Netherlands Institute of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest. It had been donated to the university by the Foundation for Hungarian Medal Art.<sup>3</sup> The motif on the cup was also employed by the artist on metal badges of different colours (fig. 3), a set of which was added to the collection of the British Museum.<sup>4</sup>

The link between the artist and the theme of the exhibition was a very personal one. The artist's father, Tamás Varga, was brought to the Netherlands at the age of four as a result of the International Children's Train Action and found a permanent home with surrogate parents as part of that relief operation supported by Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands. However, he did not lose his Hungarian identity, and even passed it on to his children. This motivated his daughter to take an interest in the Carpathian Basin, the homeland of her ancestors. She devoted a good deal of her time to Hungarian history and folklore in order to create several Hungarian-themed sculptures commemorating her origins.

Varga, who was fluent in English, French and German, easily made friends with Hungarians, among whom the famous folkdance choreographer and ethnographer Ferenc Novák (b. 1931) had the strongest connection and the greatest influence on the artist (fig. 4). The leader of various Hungarian dance companies, he had previously worked as a dance theatre director and choreographer in Amsterdam and took her to Transylvania several times, where she was able to study original, living Hungarian cultural traditions. Through Novák she was

1. Elisabeth Varga at the FIDEM congress, Budapest, 1994.



invited to the Zoltán Kallós art centre in Válaszút (Răscruți in Romania) in 2001, where she taught sculpture to young people.

The Dutch artist also had connections with Hungarian sculptors, including Győző Szatyor, Attila Bobály, Eszter Balás, Éva Varga and István Vanyúr. Hungarian medal art is highly appreciated around the world, with, as well as those working in Hungary itself, many artists of Hungarian origin active in the UK, USA, Canada, Germany, New Zealand and Australia. Looking back to the past, the famous Hungarian sculptor and medallist Ede Telcs (1872-1948) lived in Utrecht from May 1920 to June 1922 and worked in the medal department of the Van Kempen, Begeer and Vos metalworks. Some of his works were issued by the Utrecht mint and his work in the Netherlands had an influence on the development of Dutch coinage.<sup>5</sup>

My acquaintance with the artist began at the 1998 FIDEM congress in The Hague, where she not only exhibited her works at the official show at the Scheveningen museum<sup>6</sup> but also had a table at the fair at which she displayed

her medals, allowing congress participants and visitors to get a closer look at her work and communicate with her at a personal level. This was the start of a decade of our friendship, which allowed us to meet, mostly in Hungary but also a few times in the Netherlands. At the beginning of our acquaintance, I was pleased to be able to secure her inclusion in the third volume of the *Encyclopaedia of contemporary Hungarian art*, which in turn led to her inclusion in the *Encyclopaedia of sculptors of the world*.<sup>7</sup>

Our second collaboration was when I, as an art historian at the Hungarian Institute for Culture and Art, got the duty to prepare the report of the 7th Kecskemét Steel Sculpture Symposium, held in the summer of 2010, and to open an exhibition in the central square of the city presenting the material produced in that year's metal sculpture camp. In the factory halls of the KÉSZ steel factory in Kecskemét, nine artists, including Varga, had worked for two weeks using the factory infrastructure and materials. It was Elisabeth Varga who created the most sculptures in that year's workshop

2. Varga: *Michiel Adriaenszoon de Ruyter cup*, 2007, engraved glass, 20cm. ht., Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), Budapest. (Photo: Judit Fáryné Szalatnyay, © Kiscelli Museum, Budapest Historical Museum)



(fig. 5).<sup>8</sup> Utilising the steel factory's facilities, she created ten works, out of which five are discussed below. Although this was just fifteen months before her death, the artist appeared to be in good health and physical condition.

Particularly worthy of mention is the large work *Loreley* (fig. 6), made out of three Corten steel plate panels joined together. The story of Loreley, who is said for centuries to have caused the wrecking of ships on the river Rhine, has inspired many authors, including the poet Heinrich Heine and the composer Franz Liszt. From the early 1990s Varga had created works, both medals and larger sculptures, of this important figure from Germanic folklore, which is linked to the rock overlooking the Rhine. The sculpture that Varga created in Kecskemét is one of her most successful works, both in terms of grandeur and artistic expression. It suggestively depicts the beautiful woman who, according to the story, appears from time to

time on the rocky cliffs visible from the river, combing her golden hair. Its undulating lines and fluttering hair produce a lyrical effect, evoking this mythical being who leans on her right arm with convincing expressiveness. The steel plate depicting the figure was created using the Kecskemét factory's laser-cutting equipment, following the artist's designs. It currently adorns the garden of the Solei Hotel in Szeged.

In exchange for materials, machinery and technical assistance, as well as two weeks' board and lodging, the artists invited to the camp were asked to donate some of the works they created to the K-ARTS collection of the KÉSZ factory. A large-scale work by Varga, entitled *Shepherds with Dogs*, was thereby added to the collection. This, along with other pieces from the factory, has since been shown at other exhibitions in different centres (fig. 7).<sup>9</sup> It consists of two elements and is also made of sheet steel, which

3. Varga: *Michiel*  
*Adriaenszoon de Ruyter*  
 badge, 2007, mixed media,  
 57mm., British Museum.



4. Varga's bronze portrait  
 of Ferenc Novák, c.2000,  
 held by Novák, 2022.

has been cut, welded and bent. Two figures in broad-brimmed hats and wide trousers hold shepherd's crooks, each with a dog sitting at his feet. With their arms outstretched and their crook of different sizes, these shepherds, dressed in traditional costume, recall a typical occupation of the Great Hungarian Plain and the pastoral lifestyle of the area around Kecskemét. Almost life-size, these sculptures present a powerful depiction of a subject that evokes Hungary's past and an important part of its folklore.

*The Flute Player's Open-air Concert* (fig. 8) is the third sculpture created by Varga in Kecskemét. Made of polished Corten steel sheet and steel tubing, it suggests the sensuous, expressive qualities of music in its subtle play of light. The momentum and intensity of the performance cause the player's coat to flap up at the back, vividly conveying to the viewer the experience of playing the flute. This sense

of movement is also present in *Ballet Dancer*, another Corten steel sculpture that depicts a dancer leaning forward *en pointe*. The forward bend captures a moment of ballet that, in reality, lasts for just seconds. Another sculpture made in Kecskemét that has been added to the K-ARTS collection, *Little man going out to a big street* depicts a boy standing in a gate looking around in alarm. Welded together from geometric forms found in industrial scrap, it is animated by its apparent spontaneity.

Besides the Kecskemét camp, Varga took part in three other symposia for Hungarian sculptors, twice in Sellye in 1997 and 1998 and then in Salgótarján in 2001. These focused on the use of different materials, wood being the principal material used in Sellye and metal in Salgótarján. In the Hungarian newspaper *Dunántúli Napló*, Varga explained the significance of taking part in her first Hungarian group event at the age of fifty:



6. Varga: *Loreley*, 2010,  
Corten steel, 110 x 395 x  
25cm., Hotel Solei, Szeged.  
Photographed at the KÉSZ  
factory, Kecskemét, 2010.

5. Elisabeth Varga  
preparing a Corten steel  
panel for laser-cutting,  
Kecskemét, 2010.



Artists work alone at home, whereas here they can work in a community. This is a huge difference. The others see what I do, which means constant control. For me it is the first camp in my life, the first community like this. It's a great experience; it's as if the sculpture incorporates not only my thoughts, but those of the others. We are bound together by a common interest – and now by friendship.<sup>10</sup>

Although the artist is better-known in the Netherlands than in Hungary, she also had two solo exhibitions that helped create her reputation in her father's country. The first was in 1998 in the gallery of the Croatian Theatre in Pécs; the second, in the following year, was in the Balatoni Museum in Keszthely. At her second exhibition, her works were complemented by sculptures by Éva Varga, an artist with whom she shared a name but to whom she was not related, although they frequently met at FIDEM

events and at other times in Hungary. In addition, her works were shown to the public in Budapest and elsewhere as mentioned above.

Having worked in the US for a short period as au pair and travelled around Europe, Elisabeth Varga found a second home in Hungary, but it was in the Netherlands that she trained. After returning from America, she took a nursing course in Amsterdam, but, feeling a keen interest in the arts, enrolled at the Christian Academy of Art in Kampen, where she studied from 1976 to 1977. The next year she took a course at the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts – the School of Seeing – in Salzburg. Following the advice of Paul Grégoire, she continued her studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Amsterdam (1978-82), where, among many others she was taught by Paul Grégoire, Eric Claus, Cor Hund and Theresia van der Pant. There she made her first sculptures in clay, plaster and bronze. It was later on that her interests were to be



7. Varga: *Shepherds with Dogs*, 2010, Corten steel, 175 x 135 x 9cm. and 175 x 125 x 9cm., K-ARTS collection, Kecskemét. Photographed at the *Art Markets* exhibition, Budapest, 2011.



8. Varga: *The Flute Player's Open-air Concert*, 2010, Corten steel, 74 x 40 x 44cm., K-ARTS collection, Kecskemét.

directed to different materials, such as steel, glass, wax and textiles.

In 1986, through the mediation of her former professor Eric Claus, she received, from the municipality of Holten, her first commission to make a medal (fig. 9). Originally a commission for a one-sided medal with the coat of arms of Holten – the Madonna and three boars' heads – on the other, the offer of a free reverse resulted in a medal in three dimensions. Varga placed the Madonna on the obverse, whilst on the reverse she sculpted boars' heads merging into each other, with the lettering appearing on the side.

Varga became a member of FIDEM in 1990 and frequently attended FIDEM congresses from 1994 until 2010. The 1994 congress in Budapest marked her first visit to the land of her ancestors – and was the occasion of her first notable international artistic success, when the Hungarian organisers of the congress and exhibition awarded her carved alabaster medal, *On Top of the Circle (Ice Bear)* (fig. 10), the best

work by a Hungarian artist living abroad.<sup>11</sup> Examples of the winning medal were added to the collections of the Hungarian National Gallery<sup>12</sup> and the British Museum. The opaque alabaster of the medal refers in a subtle way to the polar snow and ice, the natural surroundings of the animal. The artist also developed the same subject into a sculpture, which adorned her home in Zandvoort. At her last FIDEM congress, in Tampere, Finland, Varga gave a lecture, in which she spoke about the process by which she moved away from rigid and heavy metal to the lightness of textile medals.<sup>13</sup> Made of batiste, these medals were notable for the application of a fine soft substance to a range of subjects including the everyday. They are meditative and heartfelt works. Meanwhile, other prizes had followed her 1994 success. In 2004 in Seixal, Portugal, she was awarded FIDEM's premier award, the Grand Prix, for her medallic works. Six years later, again in Seixal she won the prize for innovation at the



9. Varga: *Holten*, 1986, bronze, 67 x 70mm., private collection, The Netherlands. (Photo: © Schulman B.V., auction 366, 4 March 2021, lot 1061)



10. Varga: *On Top of the Circle (Ice Bear)*, 1993, alabaster, 71 x 73mm., British Museum.



6th International Biennale of Contemporary Medals.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s the artist was much in demand, making various medals on commission. These included commemorative medals for Leiden University and the Royal Library in The Hague and two annual medals for the Vereniging voor Penningkunst, the Dutch Art Medal Association: one in memory of Constantijn Huygens (1996) and one in memory of Prince Claus (2003). Her work can now be found in such collections as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Teylers Museum in Haarlem, the British Museum in London, the Royal Coin Cabinet in Stockholm, the State Coin Cabinet in Berlin, the Hungarian National Gallery in Budapest, the Ormánság Art Collection Foundation in Bogdása, Hungary, and, as mentioned above, the K-ARTS collection in Kecskemét and the Netherlands Institute of ELTE, Budapest. In addition to these, her

sculptures are sited in a number of public spaces. Since 1990 the city of Almelo has had her bust of Queen Beatrix, whilst in 2005 she made a bust of the composer Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck for the Oude Kerk (Old Church) in Amsterdam. In 2007 she won a competition for a sculpture in memory of the painter Jan Voerman (1857-1941), which was chosen to be placed in Hattem.

Following our meeting at the FIDEM congress in The Hague in 1998, Elisabeth Varga and I stayed in touch. Our meetings took place either in Hungary or in the Netherlands, and these occasions helped to deepen our understanding of each other. The memories I have of my visits to her home in Zandvoort are also preserved in the photographs I took (fig. 11). At the back of the garden stood her open-air atelier, where she worked on her larger pieces. Her latest work, *The Queen's Head*, lay on the table in this studio and beside the desk a

11. The front door of Elisabeth Varga's home, Zandvoort, 2010. (Photo: Ferenc Matits)



12. Varga: *Harvest in Transylvania*, 2002, bronze, 70cm. ht., Tamas Varga collection.

flamenco dancer could be seen.

Varga's works include sculptures related to Hungary: one depicts two dancers; another shows a Mangalica pig, a world-famous breed indigenous to Hungary; the next, the famous Nine-arched Bridge of Hortobágy on the Great Hungarian Plain. There is also the woman with a wide-brimmed hat gathering the harvest (fig. 12). The hat is typical of those worn by the women of Magyarvita (Viștea in Romania), an unparalleled feature in Hungarian folk costume.

The impermanence of life is well-expressed in the artist's wax medal of an angel, whose cylindrical body is formed by a wick between its wings and whose head is a flame when its

upper end is lit (fig. 13). This medal, delicately crafted by Varga, symbolises the brevity of our existence, the passing of time, and also serves as a memento. Elisabeth Varga was an artist whose personality always shines through her work. She was a good friend and a splendid representative of both Dutch and Hungarian art.<sup>M</sup>



13. Varga: *Regard the Light*, 2009, wax, wick and flame, c.80mm.



## NOTES

1. Orsolya Réthelyi, *Destination: Hope*, exh. cat. (Budapest, 2022), p. 159.
2. 'Glasgravure op replica van 17de-eeuwse roemer', *De Beeldenaar*, xxxi (2007), 4, p. 148.
3. Ferencné Keszthelyi, president of the foundation, presented the cup to the ELTE Low Countries Research Centre for Cultural Transfer. Thanks to this gift, it was also included in two exhibitions in Hungary: *Calvin's legacy* at the Budapest History Museum in 2009 and *Jean Calvin and the Protestant galleons* at the House of Culture, Ács, in 2011.
4. For these and other works by Varga in the British Museum, see [www.britishmuseum.org/collection/search?keyword=elisabeth&keyword=varga](http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/search?keyword=elisabeth&keyword=varga) (accessed 7 March 2023).
5. Jadwiga Pol-Tyszkiewicz, 'Ede Telcs: zijn oeuvre, zijn verblijf in Nederland en zijn rol als leraar en stimulator van de beeldhouwen penningkunst', *Sculptuur Studies*, 13 (2011), pp. 24-43; Jadwiga Pol-Tyszkiewicz, 'Nederlandse penningen door de Hongaarse kunstenaar Ede Telcs', *De Beeldenaar*, xxxix (2015), 1, pp. 5-9.
6. *Modern art medals. A retrospective. FIDEM XXVII* (Leiden and Scheveningen, 1998), pp. 192, 197.
7. Ferenc Matits and György Szolláth, in Péter Fritz, *Kortárs Magyar Művészeti Lexikon*, 3 vols (Budapest, 2001), iii, p. 818; Sándor Fábián, *A világ szobrászainak lexikona* (Budapest, 2008), pp. 818-19.
8. Mónika Zombori, *A művészet és az ipar találkozási csőhengerítő csarnokban*, artmagazin (2010), 4, pp. 86-7.
9. Following the final exhibition of the 7th Kecskemét Steel Sculpture Symposium in Kecskemét in 2010, it has also been seen at the Hirös Festival in Kecskemét (2010), Maecenas Day at Budapest's Kunsthalle (2010), the *Art Moments* and *Art Markets* open air exhibitions in Budapest (2011), open air exhibitions in Szeged and Budapest (2012), the *Our Territory* open air exhibition in Kiskunfélegyháza (2015), and Artplacc, Tihany (2015).
10. G.T., 'És most már a barátság is', *Dunántúli Napló*, 19 July 1997, p. 7.
11. The medal is at *FIDEM '94 XXIV. Budapest Hungary* (Budapest, 1994), p. 103, no. 43. For the award, see *Médailles 1995* (n.l., 1995), pp. 96, 98.
12. Hungarian National Gallery, reg. no. 98.2-P.
13. Elisabeth Varga, 'The medal revisited', *Médailles 2010* (Lisbon, n.d.), pp. 147-50.