

The Arts in Hungary

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Problems faced in this lecture: 1. To condense the artistic achievement of over a thousand years into a presentation of about 25 minutes. 2. To do this without audio-visual aids, since this hall is not well suited for projection. 3. And finally a desire on my part not to overwhelm the audience with strange sounding names and places, which would have little impact upon you. []

Solutions: I will talk about the arts in Hungary as a part of European civilization as a whole, to show the connections with the artistic trends prevalent at the time. My presentation will also attempt to show how political events had a profound impact on the arts in Hungary.

First a few words about the Hungarians as a people. Eleven hundred years ago, the Magyars, as they call themselves took possession of the Carpathian Basin in Central Europe, which by the year 1000 became the Christian kingdom of Hungary. At the time of their arrival in Europe, the Magyars were semi-nomadic/semi agricultural people, who had started their westward trek from the central plateaux of Asia. [] From their new home in the Carpathian Basin, the fierce Magyars raided extensively into Germany, France, Italy and out of sheer bravado even into Spain. The Hungarians, like the contemporary Vikings, the ancestors of modern Scandinavians, took special delight in attacking and pillaging monasteries, stealing gold, silver, ivory and other precious works of art, and even killed a few monks, which brought them a lot of bad press, since most of the writers of history were members of the clergy.

In a remarkably short period, however, they changed from destroyers of culture to builders of a new state. With the acceptance of Christianity around the year 1000, the Magyars became an integral part of the Medieval European cultural pattern. With the influx of missionaries from Italy, Germany, France and Bohemia, came western forms of architecture, sculpture, painting as well as literature. This does not mean that the Magyars had no artistic talents prior to their Christianization. Far from it. Archaeology has shown that the Hungarians had highly skilled silver and gold smiths, who fashioned exquisite jewelry and other ornamental items for both men and women.

The prevalent European art form at the time that the Hungarians adopted Christianity, is called Romanesque, and is characterized by massive walls, small windows and are rather somber and squat buildings. The Romanesque will eventually give way to the early Gothic, with its soaring arches, large window areas, usually stained glass, and lines which lift the spirit of the faithful toward the heavens. Churches, monasteries, royal palaces, castles, in Hungary did follow these artistic developments closely, but on a more modest scale. Yet if we look for remnants of structures from this period, we find relatively few. The reason for this is to be found in a major disaster which befell this part of Europe in 1240-41. A group of Asiatic warriors called Mongols or Tartars, (like some) having already destroyed the brilliant and populous city of Kiev, and having burned Cracow in Poland to the ground, entered Hungary and devastated the country, in what could be best described as a "scorched earth policy." The Mongols withdrew from Central Europe in 1242, but they left behind

a country on the verge of extinction. It is interesting to note that while the twin towers of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris were being built, while the magnificent nave of Westminster Abbey in London was erected, and the cathedral of Siena took form, the Hungarian survivors of the Mongol devastation were clearing away rubble, and started life anew.

The next two and half centuries were a time of rebirth and growth. Gothic cathedrals and parish churches were built or expanded. A splendid new royal capital was built at Buda, in the center of the Hungarian kingdom. The arts flourished once more, universities were founded. Although most literature was written in Latin, by the fifteenth century, Hungarian is increasingly used as a vehicle of literary expression.

Because of close dynastic and economic ties between the Kingdom of Hungary and the Italian peninsula, the Renaissance had a significant impact on the cultural life of the Magyars. The court of king Matthias Corvinus became a center of humanistic scholarship. The Hungarian monarch had the largest private library outside of Italy, and the new invention namely the printing press functioned at Buda eight years before it was established in England. Italian architects, sculptors, artisans came to the Hungarian capital and transformed portions of the royal residence into an Italianate "palacio", richly decorated with marble door and window frames, exquisite coffered ceilings, pleasure gardens. Can you see this magnificent Renaissance palace today? The answer is, unfortunately, no. In 1526 the Hungarian kingdom was overrun by the Ottoman Turks, and much of the land was under their occupation for over a 150 yrs. Buda was sacked, the magnificent library of

Matthias Corvinus was scattered or destroyed [4 vols in US], the Renaissance palace was put to the torch. Whatever escaped Ottoman destruction in the sixteenth century, was leveled in the seventeenth, during a series of wars of liberation, aimed at the expulsion of the Turks. Liberation can be devastating. After the reconquest of the capital Buda in 1686, all that was left of the once magnificent royal palace was heaps of rubble, which was used as landfill. If one desires to get a feel for Matthias Corvinus' Renaissance residence, you have to travel to Cracow, Poland. Why? Because the Italian architects and decorative artists who worked at Buda, left Hungary after the death of the great king in 1490 and were hired by the rulers of Poland, who modeled their royal residence in Cracow [Wawell Castle], in imitation of the aesthetic splendor achieved at the Hungarian capital.

Now a brief excursion to show how even tragedies of major proportions can result in something that is positive. We saw that the remnants of the late Medieval / Renaissance royal palace was used as landfill after the expulsion of the Turks. On this landfill eventually a Baroque style palace was built on the orders of the Hapsburg Emperors of Austria, who were also kings of Hungary. When in World War II the Red Army besieged Budapest in late 1944/early 45, the old historic district was virtually destroyed. The lovely Baroque palace as well as subsequent additions to it was completely burned out, once more everything was in ruins. At this critical juncture a group of art historians and archeologists requested the government for permission to dig around and under the ruins of the Baroque Palace. Soon they found the foundations of the Mediev. + Renn. building complex, were able to excavate remnants of the structure which had been required

to rubble. By sifting thousands of tons of debris, they were able to find pieces from various time periods. With incredible patience they reassembled elements of the structure from tens of thousands of fragments. If you visit Budapest, [] these fascinating reconstructions can be seen in the Museum of the City of Budapest located in and around the now rebuilt 18th cent. Baroque royal palace. [Recycled Palace - Hung. Nat. Gallery - Hung. Nat. Library]

Of all the major artistic styles that influenced the culture of the Carpathian Basin, Baroque is the most prominent. When the Ottoman Turks were finally expelled from Central and Southern Hungary, the country had to be rebuilt practically from scratch, as was the case after the Mongol incursion some 500 yrs. before. There are a few Turkish monuments which have survived through the years, such as minarets, djamis, baths, and above all a plant - paprika. — That so much of Hungary has a "Baroque Flavor" is a clear indication of the destruction of so much of the previous artistic heritage. This Hungarian Baroque is greatly influenced by trends which came from Austria + Bohemia. Painting, sculpture, architecture and music flourished. This was the period when Joseph Haydn was employed by the princely Esterhazy Family, and wrote some of his finest music. Hungary was once more part of the artistic and cultural life of the continent. A new Hungarian university is founded [], many students studied abroad, those who were Protestants went mainly to Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands or England, while Catholics sought instruction in Austria, Bavaria, Italy. The major trends which were evident in French, Italian and English literature have their perfect parallels in Hungary, where the Magyar language, with its extensive

and colorful vocabulary lent itself well to poetic and prose expression []. While the arts flourished, the Hapsburg government in Vienna kept a watchful eye on the Hungarians, who were viewed as rebellious and excessively individualistic. Although the Hapsburgs were officially the kings of Hungary, most Magyars resented the fact that they were treated as a colony of Austria. This became even more problematic with the advent of nationalism in the 19th century. After an unsuccessful War of Independence in 1848, and a period of severe repression, a compromise eventually was reached between the Emperor and the Hungarian nation, the result of which was the creation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867. This multi-ethnic, linguistically and religiously diverse state had the seeds of its demise present from the start. The ruling elements of the Empire were the German and Hungarian speaking upper classes. It did not reflect the wishes of vast numbers of ethnic groups such as Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians, Croats, Serbians, Dalmatians... etc.

Following World War I the Austro-Hungarian Empire was split up and the map of Central Europe was redrawn, not on the principles of self determination of peoples, as Pres. Wilson had advocated, but upon political considerations which have sown the seeds of ethnic conflict, the scourge of which is still with us. As a result of the so called peace treaty imposed upon Hungary, we find 5 million Hungarians of the 15 million, living outside of the borders of their homeland.

The decades following the compromise of 1867, which established the Austro-Hungarian Empire, there was an immense outpouring of creative energy in all aspects of the arts. This was the age when the Hungarian national opera came to age, the famous Academy of Music, named after its founder Franz

Liszt's were established. Its graduates, to this day are among the finest musicians in the world, especially in the areas of conducting and keyboard.

A few words about Hungarian music. First a disclaimer. Gypsy music is not Hungarian music. The Gypsies, also called Roma, are not Hungarians, but of Indian origin. Being very adaptable people, they play the music of the people among whom they live. They popularize native musical forms. Among these musical forms two will play a leading role in what is called Hungarian music, namely the csárdás and the verbunkos. The csárdás is a quick, vigorous and joyous dance, enjoyed by both men and women, but not necessarily as couples. The verbunkos has a slower rhythm, was originally a recruiting dance, and was exclusively male oriented. The composers of the Hungarian national opera, as well as Liszt and even Brahms drew upon this musical tradition, as did Bela Bartok and Zoltan Kodaly in the twentieth century.

With the establishment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an unprecedented growth in all aspects of the arts is seen throughout the Hungarian kingdom. The twin cities of Buda and Pest were united into one municipality in 1873, and Budapest set out to challenge Vienna as the cultural center of the Empire, and almost succeeded. From a rather backward, sleepy and boring place in mid 19th century, Budapest burst upon the scene as a cosmopolitan, artistically vibrant and avant-garde world capital. Budapest grew in population and splendor. Its rapid development is reminiscent of the rise of Chicago, after the great fire.

A few examples of this vitality, particularly in the arts:
A new splendid opera house was built in Budapest, still one of the acoustically most perfect buildings of its type. A Museum of Fine arts was erected to house a collection of first rate paintings by the masters of European arts, such as Raphael, El Greco, the Dutch painters and the French Impressionists. The Hungarian National Museum was built and displays the physical remains of eleven hundred years of artistic and intellectual life. []

As the capital of a proud and increasingly more significant state, Budapest saw the erection of impressive buildings, designed to a large extent to flaunt its newfound wealth and influence. This is most evident in two great public building complexes, built around 1900, the New Royal Palace in Buda and the House of Parliament on the Pest side. We saw that on the ruins of the Medieval/Renaissance palace the Hapsburgs built a lovely but relatively modest Baroque structure. The size of this new royal palace was quadruple of the original building, it was lavishly decorated in order to elevate it to a residence fitting to the dignity of a Hungarian monarch. This is the palace that was virtually destroyed during the last days of World War II, when the building burned for six days and nights. Because of constant shelling and bombardment, it was impossible for fire fighters to venture out and extinguish the flames.

The House of Parliament on the Pest side was built in a neo-Gothic style and dominates the eastern shore of the Danube, which is not blue. This structure is the largest parliament building in continental Europe, and is only a few square feet smaller than the Parliament in London, also Neo-Gothic. Fortunately this building, suffered only minor damage in World War II.

Once the Iron Curtain came down in Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary had a splendid Parliament building, but no free elections, no democracy, no independence of action. Hungary was an unwilling satellite of the Soviet Union.

It is important to note that the Communist government, especially after the failed Revolution of 1956, did ^{make available} undertake massive funding for all aspects of the arts, such as folk dancing, archeology, historic preservation and restoration, as well as publishing and the support of music. Particularly significant were the large state appropriations to support the theater, opera, symphony, and the publication of excellent quality books, both scholarly as well as popular. Tickets for cultural events were kept extremely low, in order to make the arts accessible to the masses. [] Books and records were incredibly inexpensive and read by a wide section of the population.

Since the fall of Communism, these state subsidies to the arts have been greatly reduced, with the result that many citizens who could indulge their love of the arts at a time when there was a limit on intellectual freedom, now feel shut out of the main currents of intellectual life. The arts are increasingly subjected to market driven economic trends, often with unfortunate results.

One more point concerning the 45 yrs of Communist dictatorship in Hungary. The state controlled the media, radio, television, motion pictures, publishing, everything! Everything was subject to censorship, which obviously had a negative effect on freedom of expression. One area of literature that the censors were unable to control was poetry, which as we know, is largely symbolic and is open to varied interpretation. Even in the worst days of Stalinist oppression, it was the poets who kept the flame of hope

and the desire for freedom alive. It is therefore not surprising that poets have been viewed as the conscience or soul of the Hungarian nation. Few people on earth hold their poets in such high regard.

To conclude: Hungary throughout its long and often tragic history was always a part of what we call the European cultural heritage. The arts flourished, although often under less than ideal conditions. There is a long tradition for cultural excellence and that is very much evident even at the present time. For example: Budapest with its 2 million inhabitants is not a large city by American standards. Yet, on any given evening, except Mondays [Oh. Cult. Ass.] you can attend two fullscale opera or ballet performances, can enjoy operetta or a musical in a theater reserved for this art form, choose between two or three symphony concerts with a most varied program, attend dozens of live theater performances with plays from Sophocles to Wladav Havel. In no other city in the world, with the possible exception of Vienna, will you find such varied and vibrant artistic life. If your soul is stirred by the beauty of the visual and the performing arts, do go to Hungary, and particularly to Budapest. The city is once more the jewel it was in the pre-war era. Night or day, it has a unique charm.

Finally a personal observation: If you want to feel the magic of Budapest and get the best sense of this city, arrange your itinerary in such a way that you arrive from Vienna on a fast boat called a hydrofoil. [My dearest friends, Betty + George Beelen did this, ^{in 1988} and I was delighted to greet them as they stepped on Hungarian soil].

No matter how you will get to Budapest, you will fall in love with the city, its people and all that it offers.